



A Pastoral Letter From Bishop Bard
A message of hope from General Conference in Charlotte NC
May 4, 2024



Dear Friends in Christ in The United Methodist Church in Michigan,

Many of you have heard about what happened at the postponed 2020 General Conference. Delegates made three historic major changes in the United Methodist Church, referred to by those in attendance as "The Three R's" - Regionalization, Revision of The United Methodist Social Principles, and Removal of language that limited the participation of LGBTQ+ people in the church and was considered harmful by many. I have outlined key actions taken at the General Conference below.

While there are moments when things move slowly during plenary sessions, the news from the General Conference these past two weeks came in torrents. For many, it might have felt like drinking from a fire hose. There were legislative petitions to track, not to mention the commentary offered by different groups with different perspectives or agendas. I encourage us all to take time to breathe, pray, and digest all that has happened.

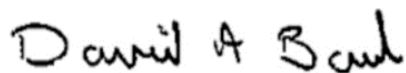
As you know, I have long favored widening the table in The United Methodist Church, expanding our tent. Pastors can now officiate at the weddings of parishioners without worrying if those parishioners are in a same-sex relationship, or if they might face ecclesial charges. Persons can respond to the call of God on their lives, and Boards of Ordained Ministry can discern those calls, regardless of the sexual orientation of the person being called.

For those troubled by these developments, I would say we are now genuinely agreeing to disagree without fear of church penalties and punitive processes. Appointments will continue to be made taking account of church and community context. Churches and pastors will make decisions about weddings.

While I will write more about the General Conference next week in my blog, I would like to conclude by sharing my hope that our United Methodist Church will be able to focus more freely on staying centered in the risen Christ and staying grounded in our Scriptures. I hope we will focus on engaging, in Spirit-filled ways, in the mission to which we are called, making disciples of Jesus Christ so that people can experience the healing and freeing grace of God in their lives and so that the world may be made more just, loving, and compassionate.

I look forward to sharing this journey in ministry with you all.

Grace and Peace,



David Alan Bard
Michigan Conference

KEY ACTIONS TAKEN AT THE POSTPONED 2020 GENERAL CONFERENCE

REGIONALIZATION

- If ratified by at least two-thirds of the global annual conference members over the next 18 months, the U.S. and each central conference (Africa, Europe, and the Philippines) will become regional conferences with the same authority to adapt the Book of Discipline for more missional effectiveness. The Michigan Conference will vote on this at our 2025 Annual Conference.
- Delegates deleted the church disaffiliation policy from the Book of Discipline.
- Annual conferences must establish a reaffiliation policy for churches that wish to return.

REVISION TO THE UMC SOCIAL PRINCIPLES

- General Conference delegates eliminated the language that “the practice of homosexuality... is incompatible with Christian teaching.”
- Delegates affirmed “marriage as a sacred, lifelong covenant that brings two people of faith (adult man and adult woman of consenting age or two adult persons of consenting age) into a union of one another and into a deeper relationship with God and the religious community.”

REMOVAL OF HARMFUL LANGUAGE

- The 40-year-old ban on recognizing, commissioning, and ordaining “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” has ended.
- Bishops and District Superintendents cannot penalize clergy or churches for holding or declining to hold same-sex weddings.
- It must be noted that nothing passed by the General Conference or under consideration would compel churches to receive a gay pastor. The legislation explicitly protects the right of clergy and churches not to officiate at or host same-sex weddings.

OTHER IMPORTANT MEASURES

- General Conference delegates passed a general budget with a bottom line that could change depending on how high collections are over the next two years. But no matter what happens, the total budget will be 30%-40% smaller than what the General Conference approved in 2016.
- The body also approved the distribution of 32 U.S. bishops, down from 37. The Interjurisdictional Committee on the Episcopacy made a recommendation affirmed by the General Conference that would allocate six bishops to the NCJ, which currently has seven. At the NCJ Conference this July, delegates will determine if they want to fund additional bishops and where they will serve.
- Deacons are now invited to offer communion and conduct baptisms in the places where they have been appointed to serve, whether that is a church, outreach ministry, or mission.
- Clergy will have a new retirement plan that moves away from pensions and functions more like secular retirement funds with a focus on sustainability and stability.